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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000288

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ MEETS WITH JEWISH LEADERS, OFFERS TO
MEDIATE WITH IRAN

REF: CARACAS 146

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

¶1. (C) President Hugo Chavez met with Venezuelan Jewish community leaders January 31 in response to recent allegations of anti-Semitism against Chavez. Jewish leaders complained of anti-Semitic statements in official media; proposed legal punishments for anti-Semitic attacks; and expressed concern over Venezuela's warming relations with Iran. Chavez designated Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, who has been supportive of the Jewish community, as the point of contact for anti-Semitic issues. Regarding relations with Iran, Chavez said he was asserting Venezuelan sovereignty, but proposed acting as a mediator with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuelan Jews. Chavez also mused that the Government of Israel might serve as a mediator between Venezuela and the USG, which Chavez claimed was conspiring with American Jews to overthrow him. Separately, in an arguably anti-Semitic incident, the government removed the name of a prominent Jewish founder of a public museum after she signed a letter complaining about Chavez' earlier, purportedly anti-Semitic comments. The Jewish community is walking a line between maintaining high-level government support and speaking out against clear anti-Semitism within Chavismo. End summary.

Chavez Meets With Jews After "Christ Killer" Slur

¶2. (C) President Hugo Chavez met with the leadership of the Venezuelan Confederation of Israeli Associations (CAIV) on January 31 to follow up on Chavez' Christmas Eve reference to "Christ Killers" (see ref). CAIV leadership had met with Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel on January 25 to go over the agenda. CAIV Political Commission Chair David Bachenheimer told Poloff February 3 that Chavez appeared to have been fully briefed by Rangel on the concerns of the Jewish community. He had apparently reviewed a dossier that

CAIV presented to Rangel with examples of anti-Semitic messages in official media. Chavez chalked up criticism from the Simon Wiesenthal Center as a USG-inspired plot to discredit him. Chavez reportedly directed Rangel to correct the problems immediately and designated him as the point of contact for any future complaints. Bachenheimer commented that he had already noted improvements in official media but could not elaborate. He also noted that Rangel had already shown his sensitivity to the Jewish community a few months earlier when, after CAIV complained of anti-Semitic comments by official radio broadcaster Alberto Nolia, the show was stopped for one week, after which Nolia had toned down his rhetoric. Press reports also quoted CAIV President Fred Pressner as requesting that the government pass a law specifically criminalizing anti-Semitic statements. After the meeting, Rangel boasted to the press after the CAIV meeting that "the door is opening the door wider and wider to dialogue."

Chavez the Peacemaker

13. (C) CAIV raised concerns over the Venezuelan government's growing relations with openly anti-Semitic Iran, Bachenheimer said. Chavez reportedly responded that his aim was to reinforce Venezuelan sovereignty vis-a-vis the United States. Chavez added, however, that he was uniquely positioned to serve as a mediator between the Venezuelan Jewish community and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to curb the Iranians' anti-Semitic attacks. Later in the conversation, Chavez noted that relations with the USG had sunk so low that

CARACAS 00000288 002 OF 002

he might ask the Government of Israel to return the favor and mediate relations between Venezuela and the United States, Bachenheimer said. Chavez lamented that President Bush does not speak to him, unlike, he said, former President Clinton. (Note: Chavez seems to have a few disconnects here. He seems to equate the Venezuelan Jews with the Government of Israel more than as Venezuelans. We also believe he is remembering incorrectly when he says he spoke regularly with former President Clinton.)

Museum Name Change: Just Bad Timing

14. (C) On January 21, a group of Jewish intellectuals published a letter in Caracas daily El Nacional condemning Chavez' "Christ Killers" comment. Within days, the government announced that the Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art would be stripped of the name Sofia Imber, the retired museum founder and signatory of the El Nacional letter. Some media reported the event as retaliation against Imber, who is Jewish. Imber said in press interviews that the name change was a long time in coming, though she believed the timing was the result of her signing the letter against Chavez. Bachenheimer dismissed Imber's allegation, arguing that Imber's daughter continued to work at the museum. He said the incident was not included in CAIV's dossier sent to the government. (Comment: We have little doubt that Imber's name was indeed removed in retaliation for her public stance against Chavez' anti-Semitism. This could be evidence of what CAIV has generally described as anti-Semitic attitudes among lower ranking government officials.)

Comment

15. (C) The Venezuelan Jewish community continues to walk the thin line between staying in the good graces of the government and speaking out when legitimate anti-Semitic attacks are made. Chavez only received CAIV, we note, after it publicly disagreed with the Simon Wiesenthal Center's

allegations against Chavez. Chavez and Rangel, no doubt, want to be seen as holding dialogues with non-Bolivarian members of civil society. We do not see Chavez changing his pro-Iran stance because of CAIV's lobbying efforts.

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